Sov 4-01, 2 Thousand Days
CIA 3-03 Cuban Missiles

A THOUSAND DAYS, PART 5

Cuba: To the Edge of the Nuclear Abyss

Kennedy was grave but unequivocal on television (Oct. 22, 1962) when he told the country about Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba and denounced the Russians for a "deliberate deception."

by ARTHUR M. SCHLESINGER JR.

On July 2, 1962 Raúl Castro, Cuba's minister of the armed forces, arrived in Moscow. Either before his arrival or very soon thereafter the Soviet and Cuban governments arrived at a startling decision: Soviet nuclear missiles were to be installed secretly in Cuba in the fall.

In a general sense, this decision obviously represented the supreme Soviet probe of American intentions. No doubt a "total victory"

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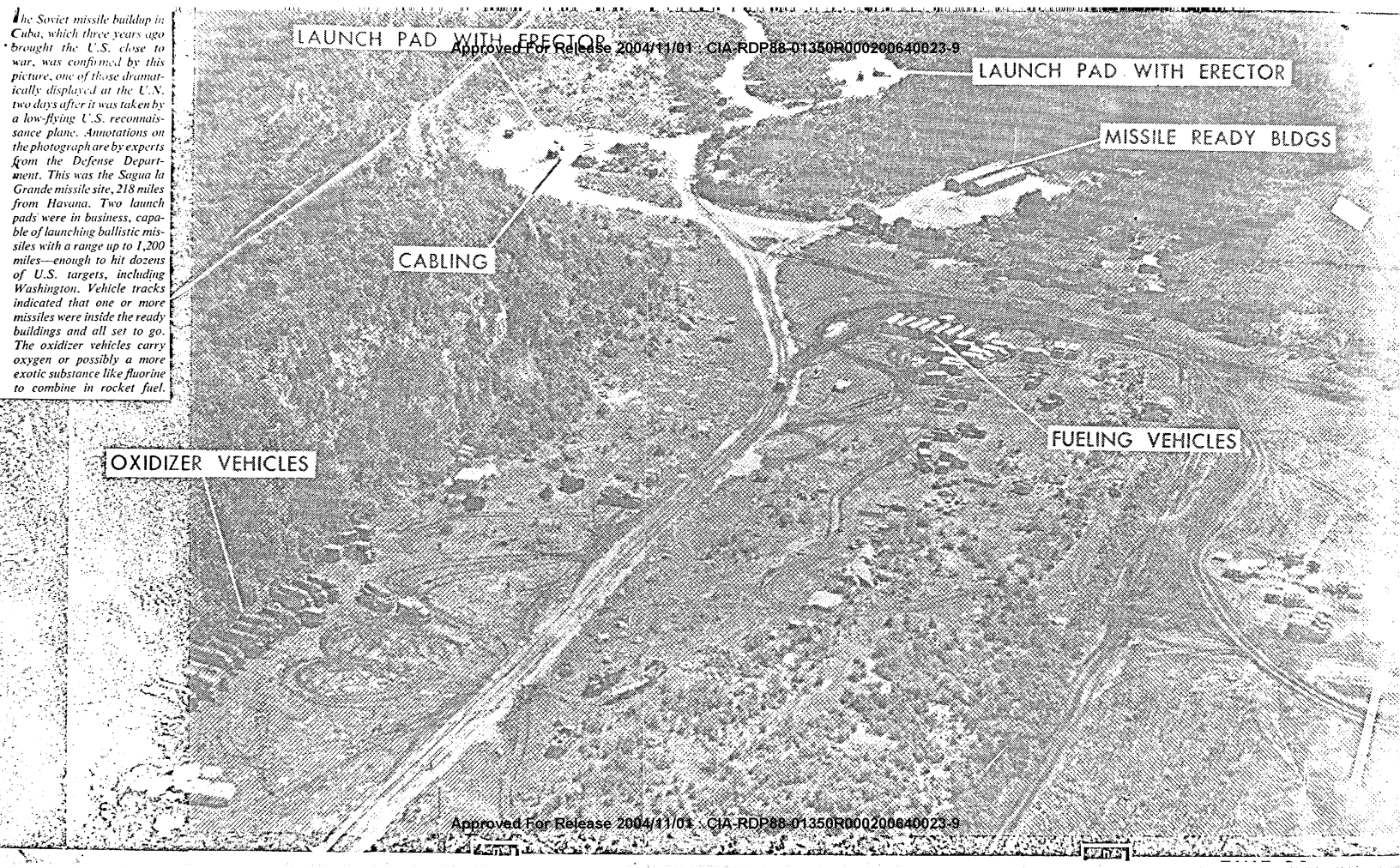

The Soviet missile buildup in Cuba, which three years ago brought the U.S. close to war, was confirmed by this picture, one of those dramatically displayed at the U.N. two days after it was taken by a low-flying U.S. reconnaissance plane. Annotations on the photograph are by experts from the Defense Department. This was the Sagua la Grande missile site, 218 miles from Havana. Two launch pads were in business, capable of launching ballistic missiles with a range up to 1,200 miles—enough to hit dozens of U.S. targets, including Washington. Vehicle tracks indicated that one or more missiles were inside the ready buildings and all set to go. The oxidizer vehicles carry oxygen or possibly a more exotic substance like fluorine to combine in rocket fuel.

faction in Moscow had long been arguing that the Soviet Union could safely use the utmost nuclear pressure against the U.S. because the Americans were too rich or too soft or too liberal to fight.

By late July the Soviet shipments began to arrive. Three weeks later the CIA sent an urgent report to the President—"something new and different" was taking place in Soviet aid operations to Cuba. There were perhaps 5,000 Soviet "specialists" now in Cuba; military construction of some sort was going on; more ships were on their way with more specialists and more electronic equipment.

The U.S. intelligence community concluded that Moscow, having resolved after a time of indecision that it had a large stake in Castro's survival, had decided to insure the regime against external attack. No one (with one exception; for the thought flickered through the mind of CIA Director John McCone) supposed that the Soviet Union would conceivably go beyond defensive weapons.

Nonetheless, when a U-2 flight on Aug. 29 showed clear evidence of SAM [Surface-to-Air-Missile] sites under construction, the President decided to put Moscow on notice. On Sept. 4, the Secretary of State brought over a draft of the warning. The draft as revised read that, while we had no evidence of "significant offensive capability either in Cuban hands or under Soviet direction," should it be otherwise, "the gravest issues would arise."

On the same day the Soviet ambassador in Washington gave the Attorney General an unusual personal message from Khrushchev for the President. The Soviet leader pledged in effect that he would stir up no incidents before the congressional elections in November. Then, a week later, Moscow said flatly that the "armaments and military equipment sent to Cuba are designed exclusively for defensive purposes."

The President in the meantime asked Congress for stand-by authority to call up the reserves, and also took the precaution of doubling the frequency of the U-2 overflights on Cuba. The evidence from flights on Sept. 5, 17, 26 and 29, and Oct. 5 and 7, as well as from other sources, indicated a continuing military build-up, large in its proportions but still defensive in its character.

Across the world, ships were sliding out of Black Sea harbors with nuclear technicians in their cabins and nuclear missiles in their hatches. Khrushchev, having done his best to lull Kennedy by public statements and private messages, now began the stealthy shipment of offensive weapons. And he had an advantage unknown to us: Soviet engineering had enormously reduced the time required for the erection of missile sites.

Meanwhile, Washington had been receiving through the refugee channels a flow of tales about nuclear installations. Lacking photographic verification, the intelligence community treated this information with reserve. In the interim, it recommended on Oct. 4 a U-2 flight over western Cuba. The recommendation was approved on Oct. 10, and from the 11th to the 13th the pilot waited for the weather to break. Sunday, Oct. 14, dawned beautiful and cloudless. When the U-2 returned from its mission, the film went swiftly to the processing laboratories. Late Monday afternoon, reading obscure and intricate markings, specialists identified a launching pad, a series of buildings for ballistic missiles and even one missile on the ground in San Cristóbal.

About 8:30 that evening the CIA informed McGeorge Bundy of the incredible discovery. Bundy knew that Kennedy would want the photographs and supporting interpretation in order to be sure the report was right and knew also it would take all night to prepare the evidence in proper form. It was better, Bundy thought, to let the President have a night's sleep in preparation for his ordeal.

The President was having breakfast in his dressing gown at 8:45 on Tuesday morning, Oct. 16, when Bundy brought the news. Kennedy asked at once about the nature of the evidence. Convinced that it was conclusive, he said that the U.S. must bring the threat to an end: one way or another the missiles would have to be removed. He then directed Bundy to institute further intelligence checks and to set up a meeting of top officials. Privately he was furious: If Khrushchev would pull this after all his protestations and denials, how could he ever be trusted on anything?

The meeting, beginning at 11:45 that morning, went on with intermissions for the rest of the week. The group soon became known as the Executive Committee, presumably of the National Security Council; the press later familiarly dubbed it ExCom, though one never heard that phrase at the time. It carried on its work with the most exacting secrecy. For this reason its members—the President, the Vice President, Secretary Rusk, Secretary McNamara, Secretary Dillon, Robert Kennedy, General Maxwell Taylor, McCone, Adlai Stevenson, Bundy, Ted Sorensen, George Ball, Roswell Gilpatric, Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson and U. Alexis Johnson, Assistant Secretary Edwin Martin, with others brought in on occa-

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sion, among them Dean Acheson and Robert Lovett—had to attend their regular meetings, keep as many appointments as possible and preserve the normalities of life. The President himself went off that Tuesday night to dinner at Joseph Alsop's. Following dinner the talk turned to the contingencies of history, the odds for or against any particular event taking place. The President was silent for a time. Then he said, "Of course, if you simply consider mathematical chances, the odds are even on an H-bomb war within 10 years." Perhaps he added to himself, ". . . or within the next 10 days."

The U.S. had, it was estimated, about 10 days before the missiles would be on pads ready for firing. This meant that the American response could not be confided to the United Nations, where the Soviet delegate would have ample opportunity to stall action until the nuclear weapons were in place. We could not even risk the delay involved in consulting our allies. The total responsibility had to fall on the United States and its President.

On Tuesday morning, the U.S. choice for a moment seemed to lie between an air strike or acquiescence—and the President had made clear that acquiescence was impossible. Listening to the discussion, the Attorney General scribbled a wry note: "I now know how Tojo felt when he was planning Pearl Harbor." Then he said aloud that the group needed more alternatives: surely there was some course in between bombing and doing nothing; suppose, for example, we were to bring countervailing pressure by placing nuclear missiles in West Berlin? Finally the group dispersed for further reflection.

The next step was military preparation for Caribbean contingencies. A Navy-Marine exercise in the area, long scheduled for this week, provided a convenient cover for the build-up of an amphibious task force, soon including 40,000 Marines. The Army gathered more than 100,000 troops in Florida. Meanwhile, the Pentagon undertook a technical analysis of the requirements for a successful strike. The conclusion, as it evolved during the week, was that a "surgical" strike confined to the nuclear missile bases alone would leave the airports and the IL-28 military jets untouched; moreover, we could not be sure in advance that we had identified or could destroy all the missile sites. Military prudence called for a much larger strike to eliminate all sources of danger—perhaps 500 sorties.

But the Soviet experts pointed out that even a limited strike would kill the Russians at the sites and might well provoke the Soviet Union into drastic and unpredictable response, perhaps even a nuclear war. The Latin American experts pointed out that a massive strike would, in addition, kill thousands of innocent Cubans. The Europeanists said the world would regard a surprise strike as an excessive response against the U.S.

When the Executive Committee met on Wednesday, Oct. 17, Secretary McNamara advanced an idea which had been briefly mentioned the day before and from which he did not thereafter deviate—the conception of a naval blockade designed to stop the further entry of offensive weapons into Cuba and hopefully to force the removal of the missiles already there. Here was a middle course, which exploited our superiority in local conventional power and would permit subsequent movement either toward war or toward peace.

As the discussion proceeded through Thursday, Oct. 18, the supporters of the air strike marshaled their arguments against the blockade. They said that it would not neutralize the weapons already within Cuba, that it could not possibly bring enough pressure on Khrushchev to remove those weapons, that it would permit work to go ahead on the bases and that it would mean another Munich. Despite such arguments, however, the majority of the Executive Committee by the end of the day was tending toward a blockade.

That afternoon, in the interests of normality, the President received Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko. Kennedy knew that there were Soviet nuclear missiles in Cuba. Gromyko unquestionably knew this too, but he did not know that Kennedy knew it. His emphasis was rather grimly on Berlin, almost as if to prepare the ground for demands later in the autumn. When the talk turned to Cuba, Gromyko heavily stressed Cuban fears of an American invasion and said with due solemnity that the Soviet aid had "solely the purpose of contributing to the defense capability of Cuba"; "if it were otherwise," the Russian continued, "the Soviet government would never become involved in rendering such assistance." To dispel any illusion about possible American reactions, the President read the foreign minister the key sentences from his earlier public statement. He went no further because he did not wish to indicate his knowledge until he had decided on his course.

Thursday evening the President met with the Executive Committee. Listening again to the alternatives over which he had been brooding all week, he said crisply, "Whatever you fellows are recommending today you will be sorry about a week from now." He was evidently attracted by the idea of the blockade. If it worked, the Russians could retreat with dignity. If it did not work, the Americans retained the option of military action. Kennedy accordingly directed that preparations be made to put the weapons blockade into effect on Monday morning.

The next day, Friday, Oct. 19, the President left Washington for a weekend of political barnstorming. He left behind a curiously restless group of advisers. This became evident when they met at the State

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Department at 11 in the morning. Over Ted Sorensen's protest, several began to reargue the inadequacy of the blockade. Someone said: Why not confront the world with a *fait accompli* by taking out the Cuban bases in a clean, swift operation?

Secretary McNamara, however, firmly reaffirmed his opposition to a strike and his support for the blockade. Then Robert Kennedy, speaking with quiet intensity, said that he did not believe that, with all the memory of Pearl Harbor and all the responsibility we would have to bear afterwards, the President of the United States could possibly order such an operation. For 175 years we had not been that kind of country. Sunday-morning surprise blows on small nations were not in our tradition.

It was now proposed that the committee break up into working groups to write up the alternative courses for the President—one to analyze the quarantine policy, the other to analyze the strike. Then everyone dispersed to meet again at 4 o'clock.

At the 4 o'clock meeting the balance of opinion clearly swung back to the blockade (though, since a blockade was technically an act of war, it was thought better to refer to it as a quarantine). In retrospect most participants regarded Robert Kennedy's speech as the turning point. The case was strengthened, too, when the military conceded that a quarantine now would not exclude a strike later.

Then they turned to the problem of the missiles already in Cuba. Someone observed that the United States would have to pay a price to get them out; perhaps we should throw in our now obsolescent and vulnerable Jupiter missile bases in Italy and Turkey. After a couple of hours, Adlai Stevenson arrived from New York. He expressed his preference for the quarantine over the strike but wondered whether it might not be better to try the diplomatic route also. We must, he said, start thinking about our negotiating position. He also echoed the suggestion that we might want to consider giving up the Italian and Turkish bases now, since we were planning to do so eventually.

The President, still campaigning, was receiving reports from his brother in Washington. The schedule now called for a speech to the nation on Sunday night, Oct. 21. By Saturday morning, however, it was evident that the preparations would not be complete in time, so it was decided to hold things for another 24 hours. Meanwhile, the President, pleading a cold as a pretext, canceled the rest of his political trip and returned to Washington.

Saturday afternoon he presided over the Executive Committee and its final debate. McNamara impressively presented the case for the quarantine. The military, with some civilian support, argued for the strike. Stevenson argued with force about the importance of a political program, the President agreeing in principle but disagreeing with his specific proposals. A straw vote indicated 11 for the quarantine, six for the strike. The President observed that every one should hope that his plan was not adopted; there just was no clear-cut answer. Then he issued orders to get everything ready for the quarantine. On Sunday morning a final conference with the military leaders satisfied him that the strike would be a mistake. His course was now firmly set.

I had known nothing about any of this. Late Friday, Oct. 19, Adlai Stevenson phoned me, saying casually that he was in Washington and wondered when we could get together. He was staying at the house of his friend Dr. Paul Magnuson across the street from my own house in Georgetown, and we agreed to ride down to the State Department together the next day. When we met after breakfast on Saturday morning, he beckoned me into the Magnuson house. "I don't want to talk in front of the chauffeur," he said; and then, in a moment, "Do you know what the secret discussions this week have been about?" I said I knew of no discussions. Observing gravely that there was trouble and he had the President's permission to tell me about it, Stevenson described the seesaw during the week between the diplomatic and military solutions. The quarantine, he now felt, was sure to win. He would have to make a speech early in the week at the Security Council, and he wanted me to help on it. He outlined the

Secretary of Defense McNamara pushed the idea of naval blockade —"a middle course" which after two days of argument in committee was adopted by the President.

argument and, with due discretion, I set to work.

The secret had been superbly kept. But later that day, when the President returned from the campaign and Rusk canceled a speech that night, a sense of premonitory excitement began to engulf Washington. By Saturday night the town was alive with speculation and anticipation.

On Sunday, Stevenson wrote down his thoughts about our U.N.

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strategy. He saw no hope of mustering enough votes in the U.N. to authorize action against Cuba in advance; but the OAS offered an opportunity for multilateral support. As for the U.N., he said, we must seize the initiative, bringing our case to the Security Council at the same time we imposed the quarantine. His political program centered on the removal, under U.N. observation, of Soviet military equipment and personnel, leading to the neutralism of Cuba. He would throw into the bargain a noninvasion guarantee to evidence our restraint and good faith. Exercising the prerogative of changing one's mind, freely employed that week by nearly all his colleagues, he now wrote that Turkey and Italy should not be included; this would only divert attention from the Cuban threat to the general issue of foreign bases.

The President, however, rightly regarded any political program as premature. Stevenson, when I saw him that weekend, took this realistically; he felt he had done his job in making the recommendation, and the decision was the President's. However, some of his colleagues on the Executive Committee worried considerably over the weekend (and some of them vocally thereafter) whether, denied his political program, the ambassador would make the American argument with sufficient force in the U.N. debate.

At 10 o'clock on Monday morning, Oct. 22, the President called me in to instruct me to go to New York and work with Stevenson. He was in a calm and reflective mood. It was strange, he said, how no one in the intelligence community had anticipated the Soviet attempt to transform Cuba into a nuclear base; everyone had assumed that the Russians would not be so stupid as to offer us this pretext for intervention. I asked why he thought Khrushchev had done such an amazing thing. He said that, first, it might draw Russia and China closer together, or at least strengthen the Soviet position in the Communist world, by showing that Moscow was capable of bold action in support of a Communist revolution; second, it also would radically redefine the setting in which the Berlin problem could be reopened after the election; third, it would deal the U.S. a tremendous political blow. When I remarked that the Russians must have supposed that we would not respond, Kennedy said, "They thought they had us either way. If we did nothing, we would be dead. If we reacted, they hoped to put us in an exposed position, whether with regard to Berlin or Turkey or the U.N."

I met with him again at 11 to go over the draft of the U.N. speech with Rusk, Robert Kennedy and others. The President suggested a few omissions, including a passage threatening an American strike if the Soviet build-up in Cuba continued; he preferred to leave that to Moscow's imagination. The Attorney General drew me aside to say, "We're counting on you to watch things in New York. . . . We will have to make a deal at the end, but we must stand absolutely firm now. Concessions must come at the end of negotiation, not at the beginning." Then, clutching the speech, I caught the first plane to New York.

In Washington everything awaited the President's television broadcast to the nation that night. Sorensen had been laboring over the draft since Friday.

Kennedy himself was never more composed. At 5 o'clock he saw the congressional leaders, many of whom had flown in from their home states in Air Force planes. He showed them the U-2 photographs and told them what he proposed to do. Senator Russell disagreed; the blockade, he argued, would be too slow and too risky—the only solution was invasion. To the President's surprise, Senator Fulbright, who had opposed invasion so eloquently at the time of the Bay of Pigs, now supported Russell. The President listened courteously but was in no way shaken in his decision. (Kennedy told me later, "The trouble is that, when you get a group of senators together, they are always dominated by the man who takes the boldest and strongest line. That is what happened the other day. After Russell spoke, no one wanted to take issue with him. When you can talk to them individually, they are quite reasonable.")

Then, at 7 o'clock, the President's speech: his expression grave, his voice firm and calm, the evidence set forth without emotion, the conclusion unequivocal. He recited the Soviet assurances, now revealed as "deliberate deception," and called the Soviet action "a deliberately provocative and unjustified change in the status quo which cannot be accepted by this country. . . ." Our "unswerving objective," he continued, was to end this nuclear threat. He concluded with quiet solemnity: "Our goal is not the victory of might, but the vindication of right; not peace at the expense of freedom, but both peace and freedom here in this hemisphere and, we hope, around the world. God willing, that goal will be achieved."

After the broadcast the President returned to the Mansion, sought out Caroline and told her stories until it was time for dinner. He dined alone with Jacqueline.

We listened to the speech clustered around a television set in Stevenson's office in New York. I had found Adlai unperturbed in the midst of pandemonium. He had to talk so much to U.N. delegates from other nations that he had little time left over for his own speeches and strategy. Through Monday evening and Tuesday morning, Oct. 23, he snatched moments to revise and edit his remarks for the Security Council. The last part of Stevenson's address was still in the typewriter at the U.S. mission on Tuesday afternoon when he had already begun to speak across the street at the U.N.

The speech, extraordinarily elo-

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quent, was delivered to a hushed chamber. He concluded: "Let [this day] be remembered, not as the day when the world came to the edge of nuclear war, but as the day when men resolved to let nothing thereafter stop them in their quest for peace." The President, who had been watching on television, immediately dictated a telegram: "DEAR ADLAI: I WATCHED YOUR SPEECH THIS AFTERNOON WITH GREAT SATISFACTION. IT HAS GIVEN OUR CAUSE A GREAT START. . . . THE UNITED STATES IS FORTUNATE TO HAVE YOUR ADVOCACY. YOU HAVE MY WARM AND PERSONAL THANKS."

And now the tension was rising. In Cuba workmen were laboring day and night to complete the bases. On the Atlantic at least 25 Soviet merchant ships were steaming toward Cuba. Ninety ships of the American fleet, backed up by 68 aircraft squadrons and eight aircraft carriers, were moving into position to intercept and search the onrushing ships. In Florida and neighboring states the largest invasion force since the Second World War was gathering.

On Tuesday night the President dined at the White House with English friends. Cuba was not mentioned at the table, but after dinner he beckoned David Ormsby Gore out into the long central hall, where they talked quietly while the gaiety continued in the dining room. The British ambassador, mentioning that the reaction in his own country had been dubious, suggested the need for evidence: could not the aerial photographs be released? The President sent for a file, and together they went through them, picking out the ones that might have the greatest impact on skeptics. In a while Robert Kennedy walked in, bleak, tired and disheveled. He had just been to see Ambassador Dobrynin in an effort to find out whether the Soviet ships had instructions to turn back if challenged on the high seas. The Soviet ambassador, the Attorney General said, seemed very shaken, out of the picture and unaware of any instructions. This meant that the imposition of the quarantine the next day might well bring a clash.

The three old friends talked on. Ormsby Gore recalled a conversation with Defense Department officials who had declared it important to stop the Soviet ships as far out of the reach of the jets in Cuba as possible. The British ambassador now suggested that Khrushchev had hard decisions to make and that every additional hour might make it easier for him to climb down gracefully; why not, therefore, make the interceptions much closer to Cuba and thereby give the Russians a little more time? If Cuban aircraft tried to interfere, they could be shot down. Kennedy, agreeing immediately, called McNamara and, over emotional Navy protests, issued the appropriate instructions. This [illegible] well have been of vital importance.

Around the world emotions rose —fear, doubt, incertitude, apprehension. In the White House the President went coolly about his affairs, watching the charts with the Soviet ships steadily advancing toward Cuba, scrutinizing every item of intelligence for indications of Soviet purpose, reviewing the deployment of American forces. He said to someone, "I guess this is the week I earn my salary."

It was a strange week; the flow of decision was continuous; there was no day and no night. In the intervals between meetings the President sought out his wife and children as if the imminence of catastrophe had turned his mind more than ever to his family and, through them, to children everywhere in the world. One noon, swimming in the pool, he said to his friend and aide Dave Powers, "If it weren't for these people that haven't lived yet, it would be easy to make decisions of this sort."

In New York on Wednesday, Oct. 24, U.N. Secretary General U Thant made an unexpected intervention, proposing that the Soviet Union suspend its arms shipments and the U.S. its quarantine to allow an interlude for negotiations. Khrushchev accepted this thought at once and with evident pleasure; but, from our viewpoint, it equated aggression and response, said nothing about the missiles already in Cuba, permitted work to go forward on the sites and contained no provisions for verification. New York and Washington agreed in rejecting U Thant's proposal, but Stevenson and John J. McCloy, who was now with him, recommended a response which would keep the diplomatic option alive.

On Wednesday night, at the U.S. mission in New York, I received a telephone call from Averell Harriman. Speaking with unusual urgency, he said that Khrushchev was desperately signaling a desire to cooperate in moving toward a peaceful solution. Harriman particularized the evidence; Khrushchev's suggestion of a summit meeting in his reply to a message from the British pacifist Bertrand Russell; his well-publicized call on the American singer Jerome Hines the night before, after a Moscow performance; his amiable if menacing talk with an American businessman, William Knox of Westinghouse Electric; the indications that afternoon that the nearest Soviet ships were slowing down and changing course. This was not the behavior of a man who wanted war, Averell said; it was the behavior of a man who was begging our help to get off the hook. Khrushchev had sent up similar signals after the U-2 affair in 1960, Harriman continued, and Eisenhower had made the mistake of ignoring him; we must not repeat that error now. "If we do nothing but get tougher and tougher, we will force him into countermeasures. The first incident on the high seas will engage Soviet prestige and infinitely reduce the chance of a peaceful solution."

These words seemed utterly convincing to me. I asked him whether he had made these points at the State Department. He said, "I haven't been in on this at all." Accordingly I sent Harriman's views along to the President. Kennedy

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called him the next morning, and I imagine that Harriman's counsel may have strengthened his own inclination to go further along the diplomatic road. At any rate, his reply to U Thant authorized Stevenson to continue discussions. This was a second vital decision.

Further encouraging signs came on Thursday, Oct. 25. Half the Soviet ships, it appeared, had put about and were heading home. Others were evidently waiting for further orders. Only one had entered the blockade zone—a tanker, obviously not carrying nuclear weapons. The President decided to give Khrushchev more time and said that the tanker, once it had identified itself, should be permitted to proceed without boarding and search—a third vital decision.

There were other portents. For the first time all week Soviet diplomatic behavior across the world was beginning to conform to a pattern: this indicated that Moscow had at last sent out some instructions.

The essence of the emerging pattern seemed to be concern for a peaceful settlement. That was what the Soviet ambassadors in London and Bonn were saying to the British and West German governments. But despite these gestures the situation was still loaded with danger. On Thursday afternoon at the U.N., Stevenson returned to the debate in the Security Council. He crisply dismissed the Communist argument that the U.S. had created the threat to the peace: "This is the first time that I have ever heard it said that the crime is not the burglary, but the discovery of the burglar."

Russia's Valerian Zorin made a cocky but evasive reply. Now Stevenson turned on him with his magnificent scorn: "Do you, Ambassador Zorin, deny that the U.S.S.R. has placed and is placing medium- and intermediate-range missiles and sites in Cuba? Yes or no? Don't wait for the translation. Yes or no?"

Zorin then muttered something about not being in an American courtroom. Stevenson, cold and controlled: "You are in the courtroom of world opinion. . . . You have denied they exist, and I want to know if I understood you correctly. . . . I am prepared to wait for my answer until hell freezes over. And I am also prepared to present the evidence in this room!"

It was a moment of tremendous excitement. At Stevenson's order, aerial photographs were spread on easels in the council chamber, showing the transformation of San Cristóbal from a peaceful country spot into a grim nuclear installation. Other pictures added further evidence. Zorin wanly denied the authenticity of the display. Stevenson wondered savagely why the Soviet Union did not test its denial by permitting a United Nations team to visit the sites.

Then, in a moment, Stevenson concluded: "We know the facts and so do you, Mr. Zorin, and we are ready to talk about them. . . . Our job, Mr. Zorin, is to save the peace. If you are ready to try, we are."

On Friday, Oct. 26, work in Cuba still continued on the sites. Some of the men around Khrushchev—perhaps the Soviet military—were apparently determined to make the missiles operational as speedily as possible. But Khrushchev himself, having abandoned the effort to bring in more nuclear weapons, now evidently wanted to call the whole thing off.

At 1:30 p.m. on Friday, John Scali, the State Department correspondent for the American Broadcasting Co., received a message from Aleksandr Fomin, a counselor at the Soviet embassy, requesting an immediate meeting. Scali, who had lunched occasionally with Fomin in the past, joined him at once in the Occidental Restaurant. The usually phlegmatic

Stevenson was magnificent at the U.N. His famous "until hell freezes over" speech shattered the Russian case and put world opinion firmly on the side of the U.S.

Russian, now haggard and alarmed, said, "War seems about to break out. Something must be done to save the situation." Scali replied that they should have thought of that before they put the missiles in Cuba. The Russian sat in silence for a moment. Then he said, "There might be a way out. What would you think of a proposition whereby we would promise to remove our missiles under United Nations inspection, where Mr. Khrushchev would promise never to introduce such offensive weapons into Cuba again? Would the President of the United States be willing to promise publicly not to invade Cuba?" When Scali said he did not know, Fomin begged him to find out immediately from his State Department friends. Then, reaching for a pencil, he wrote down his home telephone number: "If I am not at the embassy, call me here. This is of vital importance."

Scali carried the proposal to Roger Hilsman at State, and Hilsman carried it to Rusk. After discussion with the Executive Committee, Rusk asked Scali to tell the Russian that we saw "real possibilities" for negotiation but they must understand that time was short—no more than 48 hours. At

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7:30 Friday evening Scali passed this word along. They met this time in the coffee shop of the Statler Hilton. Fomin, after a brief attempt to introduce the idea of U.N. inspection of Florida as well as Cuba, rose and, in his haste to get the word back, tossed down a $5 bill for a 30¢ check and sped off without waiting for the change.

Two hours later a long letter from Khrushchev began to come in to the President by cable. The Soviet leader started by insisting that the weapons shipments were complete and that their purpose was defensive. Then he declared his profound longing for peace; let us, he said with evident emotion, not permit this situation to get out of hand. If the U.S. would give assurances that it would not invade Cuba and would recall its fleet from the blockade, this would immediately change everything. Then the necessity for a Soviet presence in Cuba would disappear. The crisis, Khrushchev said, was like a rope with a knot in the middle: the more each side pulled, the more the knot would tighten, until finally it could be severed only by a sword. But if each side slackened the rope, the knot could be untied.

Khrushchev's letter was not, as subsequently described, hysterical. Though it pulsated with a passion to avoid nuclear war and gave the impression of having been written in deep emotion, why not, with the world on the brink of nuclear holocaust? In general, it displayed an entirely rational understanding of the implications of the crisis. Together with the Scali proposal, it promised light at the end of the cave. And in New York on Friday we heard that Zorin had advanced the same proposal to U Thant. The President probably had his first good night's sleep for 10 days; certainly the rest of us did.

But when the Executive Committee assembled on Saturday morning, Oct. 27, prospects had suddenly darkened. The Moscow radio began to broadcast a new Khrushchev letter containing, to everyone's consternation, an entirely different proposition from the one transmitted through Scali and embodied in Khrushchev's letter of the night before: that the Soviet Union would remove its missiles from Cuba and offer a nonaggression pledge to Turkey if the U.S. would remove its missiles from Turkey and offer a nonaggression pledge to Cuba. Kennedy regarded the idea as unacceptable, and the swap was rejected.

Then came word that a U-2 plane was missing over Cuba, presumably shot down. Did this signify that the confrontation was entering its military phase? Should the U.S. now retaliate by knocking out a SAM site? And, if it began military counteraction, could it stop short of an invasion? The President declined to be stampeded. Again he insisted that the Russians be given time to consider what they were doing before action and counteraction became irreversible.

There remained the two Khrushchev letters, and the Executive Committee turned to them with bafflement and something close to despair. It was noted that Defense Minister Malinovsky had mentioned Cuba and Turkey together as early as Tuesday, Oct. 23, and that *Red Star*, the army paper, had coupled them again on Friday, Oct. 26. Could the military have taken charge in Moscow? Rusk called in Scali and asked him to find out anything he could from his Soviet contact. Scali, fearful that he had been used to deceive his own country, upbraided Fomin, accusing him of a double-cross. The Russian said miserably that there must have been a cable delay, that the embassy was waiting word from Khrushchev at any moment. Scali brought this report immediately to the President and the Executive Committee at the White House (where Pierre Salinger nearly had heart failure when, in the midst of the rigorous security precautions of the week, he suddenly saw the ABC reporter sitting at the door of the President's inner office).

Meanwhile, a new crisis: another U-2, on a routine air sampling mission from Alaska to the North Pole, had gone off course and was over the Soviet Union; it had already attracted the attention of Soviet fighters and was radioing Alaska for help. Would the Russians view this as a final reconnaissance in preparation for nuclear attack? What if they decided to strike first? Roger Hilsman took the frightening news to the President. There was a moment of absolute grimness. Then Kennedy, with a brief laugh, said, "There is always some so-and-so who doesn't get the word."

Later Saturday afternoon the Executive Committee met again. Robert Kennedy now came up with a thought of breathtaking simplicity and ingenuity: why not ignore the second Khrushchev message and reply to the first? Forget Saturday and concentrate on Friday? This suggestion was probably more relevant than anyone could have known. For the so-called second letter may well have been, in fact, the first letter. Its institutional style suggested that it was written in the foreign office, and it read as the immediate follow-on of Khrushchev's Thursday reply to U Thant. It was very likely drafted in Moscow on Thursday and Friday for Saturday morning release in New York. The so-called "first letter," which reflected the movement of events far beyond the U Thant proposal and which was clearly written by Khrushchev himself, may well have been composed late Friday night (Moscow time) and transmitted immediately to Kennedy while the "second" letter was in the bureaucratic pipeline.

At any rate, on Saturday, Oct. 27, Kennedy wrote Khrushchev, "I have read your letter of Oct. 26th with great care and welcomed the statement of your desire to seek a prompt solution." As soon as work stopped on the missile bases and the offensive weapons were rendered inoperable under U.N. supervision, Kennedy continued, he would be ready to negotiate a settlement along the lines Khrushchev had proposed. The message shot inscrutably into the night. Robert Kennedy carried a copy to the Soviet ambassador, saying grimly that, unless we received assurances in 24 hours, the U.S. would take action by Tuesday.

Saturday night was almost the blackest of all.

Sunday, Oct. 28, was a shining autumn day. At 9 in the morning Khrushchev's answer started to come in. By the fifth sentence it

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was clear that he had thrown in his hand. It was all over, and just barely in time.

If word had not come that Sunday, if work had continued on the bases, the U.S. would have had no real choice but to take some action against Cuba the next week. No one could discern what lay darkly beyond an air strike or invasion, what measures and countermeasures, actions and reactions might have driven the hapless world to the ghastly consummation. The President saw more penetratingly into the mists and terrors of the future than anyone else. A few weeks later he said, "If we had invaded Cuba . . . I am sure the Soviets would have acted. They would have to, just as we would have to. I think there are certain compulsions on any major power." The compulsions opened up the appalling world of inexorability. The trick was to cut the chain in time.

When Kennedy received Khrushchev's reply that golden October morning, he showed profound relief. Later he said, "This is the night to go to the theater, like Abraham Lincoln."

Homeward bound with shrouded objects believed to be missile launchers, a Soviet merchant ship sailed from Havana on Nov. 9, 1962—the same day Khrushchev appeared in Moscow, shaken. Some Russian military men opposed his decision but Aleksei Kosygin, now premier, supported it.